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SUBJECT Klaus Barbie Cover-up

JANE PAULEY: Some new developments in the Klaus Barbie case are startling. Correspondent Mark Nikannen is here with them.

MARK NIKANNEN: Thanks, Jane.

The Justice Department is investigating Klaus Barbie's relationship with U.S. spy agencies after World War II. Now according to sources close to the investigation, Barbie ran a spy network for U.S. military intelligence in postwar Germany. But, the sources say, there was a problem using Barbie as a spy. The French wanted him for war crimes, so U.S. officials devised a coverup. They used a front man.

A small castle deep in the Bavarian forest, a house that was a spy nest near Augsburg, Germany, a question mark next to the description of a Nazi spy's death; his grave in a small German town: All were part of Joseph Murk's secret life and mysterious death.

During World War II, Murk was a Nazi spy in France. He worked closely with Klaus Barbie who ran the German Gestapo in Leon. Sources close to the investigation say, in 1948, in this house near Augsburg, Germany, U.S. military intelligence used Murk as a front man for Barbie's spy work. Information gathered by Barbie was attributed to Murk in spy reports.

A source at the Justice Department says the substitution of Murk's name for Barbie's is causing problems, because investigators can't tell exactly what Barbie did by reading the spy reports. The source also says the investigation has been hampered because other reports from Murk and Barbie were read and

destroyed by military intelligence.

In February, 1951, Barbie went to South America to escape the French. Within months of his departure, Joseph Murk, who knew exactly what Barbie did for the U.S., died at the age of 36 in this Bavarian castle, a center for U.S. spying in postwar Germany. His family says he was murdered to keep him silent. They say U.S. officials told them he died from a poisonous bee sting. Roman Catholic Church records in his home town list his cause of death as heart attack-question mark.

[FILM CLIP]

MAN: It is questionable if he died of natural cause or he was murdered.

NIKANNEN: Dr. Rudolph Thannheimer was the German physician called in to examine Murk's body. Then, he said, Murk died of a heart attack. Now, after a silence of nearly 32 years, he says, "I don't know how he died." Thannheimer would not talk to us on camera, nor would he answer any other questions about Murk's death, saying, "I don't want to be involved in this thing." Sources close to the Justice Department investigation fear that when Murk was buried, so were many of the secrets of Klaus Barbie's role as a U.S. spy.

Apparently, Klaus Barbie won't reveal any secrets to U.S. officials. NBC News has learned the Justice Department will not be permitted to question him about his involvement with U.S. intelligence agencies.

Jane?

PAULEY: And classified documents that belong to the U.S. and French governments are telling a little bit more about the Barbie case. Some documents were recently turned over to the Justice Department by Nazi hunter, Biata Klairsfield. She and her husband, Serge, tracked down Barbie in Bolivia. Incidentally, Biata Klairsfield is a paid consultant for NBC News.

What do those documents show?

BIATA KLAIRSFIELD: Well these new documents that have been discovered by the high commander from the U.S. in Germany. And they show exactly that the United States protected Barbie, that they had known who was Barbie, and they delayed any decision in turning him over to the French government of (unintelligible).

PAULEY: There's some inconsistency, in that the American officials evidently were offering him for one purpose and yet denying they knew his existence on the other.

BIATA KLAIRSFIELD: Yes. In '48, Barbie was interrogated by the French police officers four times: in Munich and Frankfurt, in the U.S. zone in Germany. And then the Americans proposed to the French to have him for the Hardy trial in Paris under certain conditions: to return him to the U.S. zone, to keep him only for a short time, and to assure him his personal security.

NIKANNEN: Why, if the U.S. officials were making him so available to the French, didn't they just turn him back over to the French and say, 'here, you can have him'?

BIATA KLAIRSFIELD: Don't forget that Barbie was a Nazi and a Gestapo leader and anti-communist fighter; and he was used by the American CIC to spy in communist countries. And one document also says that he had some contact persons in Poland, Czechoslovakia, but especially in the Soviet zone.

NIKANNEN: So he was running a spy network?

BIATA KLAIRSFIELD: Oh yes, it was.

NIKANKNEN: Was there some fear, do you think, on the part of U.S. officials, that if they turned him over the French, that he might reveal something about the American operations?

BIATA KLAIRSFIELD: Yes. I think that America didn't want to let him go to the French, because he could reveal the work he had done for the United States. And finally, then, the French government offered a position officially in Washington. They gave him the permanent travel document. And in '51, Klaus Barbie, with the help of certain Americans, left (unintelligible), Italy for Bolivia.

PAULEY: A remarkable story that we have not yet heard the end of.

We'll be back. This is Today on NBC.